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## AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

### Spoilage signified

24 October 2013

Your excellent feature “[Evolution of evaluation \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/evolution-of-the-ref/2008100.article\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/evolution-of-the-ref/2008100.article)” (17 October) did not discuss the importance of the name change from the research assessment exercise to the research excellence framework. This actually signifies a profound shift in the governance of UK research.

The former suggests some kind of survey aimed at assessing research, a survey of what exists. “Exercise” suggests something provisional, temporary, improvised to meet a particular need, so not to be taken too seriously. The term “research assessment exercise” therefore is a neutral term implying a descriptive survey of the reality of the research going on in universities. If some choose to try to influence it by “game-playing”, that is something pathological and to be deplored.

But “research excellence framework” signifies something else entirely. A framework is a permanent structure set in place in order to shape that which is within it. While the term “assessment” is neutral, the term “excellence” is normative: excellence is a good thing, something to be aspired to. So a “research excellence framework” should promote excellence in research within universities. It is a policy, a system of incentives placed on institutions, which must adopt strategies, however Procrustean, in response to comply. The REF has strategising at its heart. If universities try to manipulate the outcome by game-playing, that is only natural.

This framework is damaging to UK research. It does not promote excellence but rewards conformity and penalises the interdisciplinarity from which intellectual advances often spring.

**Dennis Leech**  
**Professor of economics**  
**University of Warwick**